

The All-Too-Secret Life of Architecture: A Case for Transparency

BY MARK ASHER, AIA

I bought a used copy of Ramsey and Sleeper's famed *Architectural Graphic Standards* when I was in high school. You may remember the foreboding red-and-black cover and the text that had a hand-lettered feel to it. It was serious of mind. Computers had not yet come along, so if you wanted to know something, it was going to be in a book. Imagine that. I remember poring over the pages, looking for the "how to" of it all. And yet, I never found exactly what I was looking for.

It was a great book, if you wanted to know the turning radius of a truck or the dimensions of a filing cabinet. But if you wanted to find out how buildings went together, you were in for a rough ride. Don't get me wrong, the information was there for the intrepid. But it was more like an archaeological dig than the pure transfer of information. The type of nail was on page 10, the shingle on page 23, the sheathing on page 109. Eventually, with some trial and error, one could put the pieces together. Ultimately, however, and as I'm sure most of us did, I just looked at a good set of drawings done by a respected colleague. Lest I be sued by the publisher, note that the latest editions and their various offspring are vastly improved. Go buy a new copy, but you will miss the hand lettering.

It took me a while to figure out that the impenetrable jargon of it all was not my own failure. As I gained experience, I came to realize it wasn't me—rather I'd been looking at an odd mirror of the architectural profession itself. The information is out there, but we don't seem to do a very good job of putting it all together in one cohesive place. We never seem to get to this is how it works; this is how much it costs; this is how long it will take. We do ourselves and our profession a disservice in the opaqueness of it all. Our clientele is often thoroughly unaware of what we actually do, even as we are killing ourselves doing it. With so much transparency in the world today, what other transaction carries such mystery?

Photos: Joseph M. Kitchen Photography



This page: Mark Asher, AIA, and partner Deborah Slaunwhite, AIA, operate offices in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, and Stone Harbor, New Jersey. Their work encompasses urban, suburban, and coastal design. Shown here, a recent house in the Philadelphia suburbs.





This page: Asher Slaunwhite specializes in coastal architecture and roots its design ideology in New Urbanist principles. Shown here: a transitional beach house in Stone Harbor.

One need not be a car expert to grasp the basic concept of automobiles. Of course, they are advertised 24/7, but you know how much they cost, what type you need, want, or can afford. No one ever strolls into their local Rolls-Royce dealership by mistake looking for a \$25,000 car. Yet, that sort of thing happens to me fairly frequently. Who among us hasn't had the client with 10,000 square feet of program and 3,000 square feet of budget? I suspect we have only ourselves to blame.

Yes, the information is out there to find, but it isn't easy. I blame the opacity of it all, and the secret life of architecture. In any given architectural publication, the photos will be stunning, the product specifications dutifully listed, room sizes labeled, and then come these fateful words: "cost withheld at owner's request." We all understand the privacy concerns—no one wants their financial information on full display—but still the information gap of cost, process, and fee exists in a haze of seemingly guarded ritual, and the profession suffers for it.



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We compete for clients, market share, and, indeed, relevance on a playing field that is very uneven. Tilting that field against us is myth and rumor. It is perhaps our largest enemy. Every client seems to have a friend of a friend who has built a house for less. Every

client has a relative with an architect who worked for beads and blankets. The public may know more about the surface of the moon than they do the profession of architecture. This is all the more baffling given the increased interest in building design vis-à-vis Pinterest, Houzz, and other social media.


My office has been very fortunate. We have had ample opportunity to design and build custom homes. It is simply through experience that we know how much they cost, and



This page: The firm's projects run the gamut of traditional to contemporary design, with many homes nesting comfortably in a hybrid transitional style.

we can usually set the expectations accordingly. We also know the information will not be in any cost estimating manual. Almost miraculously, it is the only bit of information not to be found on the internet. We keep our own running database of construction costs. The opaqueness that surrounds construction costs runs even deeper for design fees. In writing this and out of curiosity, I searched the web for residential architectural fees. This took only the seconds I needed to type the words. The first hit described fees of 12 percent to 20 percent of construction costs. The second claimed fees of \$650 low to \$20,000 high. Sadly, I am not making this up. Imagine a potential client making this same search. Without any frame of reference, the numbers are meaningless.

Much has been written about the architecture profession and its ceding of influence to developers and other consultants. I would argue that what we have failed at is the dissemination of clear information, to each other and to our clients. Our job is so much easier, our hands so much freer, and the outcome so much more satisfying when our clients come to us well-informed. As a profession, we must reach out and teach the simple basics of how much and how long. There might be a slim argument that the truth of it will scare off prospective clients. But I think removing the mystery of it and adding clarity will serve only to expand the client base.

There are three final secrets in the life of residential architecture. One is how bloody hard this is to do. Another is how hard it is to do well. The last secret is how wonderful a thing this is that we get to do. I just think we can make life a little easier on ourselves. 

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